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For 15 years quiet, charming Col. Stig Wennerström sold Swedish, British, American and NATO defense secrets to Soviet paymasters—with results that have rocked the free world

The Case of the Swedish Spy

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ON THE morning of June 20, 1963, a tall man strode rapidly across a bridge in downtown Stockholm. Three detectives suddenly appeared in his path. One of them extended his hand, affably introduced himself and told Col. Stig Wennerström that he was under arrest. Without protest, the colonel followed the detectives to their car. Thus, in a businesslike and undramatic way, ended one of the most dramatically successful Soviet espionage careers since the outbreak of the cold war.

Wennerström's arrest rocked Sweden. The black streamers across Stockholm's newspapers did not exaggerate: BIGGEST SWEDISH ESPIONAGE SCANDAL OF ALL TIME—COLONEL SOLD DEFENSE SECRETS 'WORTH BILLIONS—HIRED BY THE RUSSIANS FOR 15 YEARS.

The shock waves reached to London and Washington, for the colonel

Col. Stig Wennerström

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had been a wholesale merchant of espionage, compromising not merely Swedish but also British, American and NATO military secrets. He ultimately admitted to 160 instances of espionage against Sweden; among other things, he betrayed his country's air-defense system, provided the Russians with design details of its newest military aircraft, as well as information about British and U.S. missiles. The court, imposing a life sentence, calculated that he had collected nearly $100,000 from his Soviet paymasters.

In Washington, the arrest brought incredulity. The Wennerströms were a well-known and likable couple on the cocktail circuit—wife Ulla irrepressible and somewhat flighty; the 56-year-old colonel a bit reserved, but charming. Women found him attractive—a lean, athletically built man with the kind of clipped, clean-cut features that retain the glow of youth despite advancing years and a receding hairline.

In Sweden, the case quickly boiled up into an explosive political issue. How had it been possible for a high-ranking officer to carry on a mass-production espionage operation for so long without detection? Equally baffling: How could a man of his background have turned traitor? Where was the hidden flaw?

Not an Easy Target. Outwardly, Stig Wennerström was one of the least likely recruits for Soviet espionage. He had never been a communist or expressed left-wing sympathies. He was not an easy target for blackmail, for he was not a homosexual, a gambler or a philanderer. From all accounts, he was devoted to his wife of 24 years and to his two daughters, who were 17 and 21 at the time of his arrest.

Indeed, the notable thing about Wennerström was that he was almost boringly average. He drank moderately, was content with simple food. His sports were golf and curling, and he enjoyed bridge. He had no interest in music or art. He did, perhaps, have an excessive interest in party-going, but his conduct was always impeccable.

He normally avoided any discussion involving politics or foreign affairs. Even with the aid of hindsight, Wennerström's acquaintances can recall only one possibly revealing remark. At a dinner party, when one of the guests gave a little speech about the glories of the French language, Wennerström demurred, "In a few years," he said, "there will be one and a half world languages, and English will be the half. The dominating language will be Russian. We might as well face the truth." The comment raised no quiver of suspicion at the time.

Wennerström's bland quality hid a personality more enigmatic than anyone surmised, with the exception of his Russian masters. But the results of police interrogation and other investigation made after his arrest allow one to pierce his protective façade.

Planting of the Seed. It is now clear that Wennerström was a man of great pride who sought a larger role in life than his talents would allow. He saw "big-power espionage" as a vast and intriguing game, in which he was flattered to play a leading part. The Russians cleverly fed his self-esteem.

Born August 22, 1906, into an army officer's family, Wennerström was a shy, introverted lad. He had few close friends in childhood, and seems to have been on poor terms with his father, a distant, reserved figure. Relations with his mother were more affectionate. Some of his acquaintances thought Stig a bit of a weakling; his decision to pursue a military career surprised them.

Self-improvement was a constant impulse in his early years. When the other young officers gathered at night for a bit of roistering, Wennerström stayed in his room to bone up on his Russian. He had decided to study the language, he told the police, because he thought it might come in handy at some future time.

Trained as a naval officer, in the 1930's he switched to the air force. A visit to Riga in the winter of 1933-34 on a military scholarship to study Russian first awakened his interest in espionage. Riga, capital of then independent Latvia, was a famous "listening post" near the Soviet border, a town filled with spies and tipsters, diplomats and double agents. Wennerström received a certain number of embassy invitations and, as he put it, "got along exceptionally well in this form of social life." He was always to be a social climber.

No Moral Qualms. In 1939, after his return from Riga, Wennerström married Ulla-Greta Carlsson, daughter of a well-to-do Stockholm newspaper executive. Ulla, 13 years younger than her husband, adored him and readily acquiesced in his [illegible] She maintains that she never knew about his espionage activity.

Wennerström was sent to Moscow in 1940 as air attaché, largely because of his command of Russian. The Nazi-Soviet pact was still in force, but there was a growing restiveness between the partners. Wennerström established contact with his opposite numbers at other embassies. As with many Swedish military men at this stage of the war, his sympathies may well have been with Germany; in any case he had no moral qualms about supplying the Nazis with the information he collected about Russia in the course of his work. The Germans reciprocated by giving him access to their source of black-market rubles.

After returning to Sweden in March 1941, Wennerström continued amiable relations with the German embassy. In 1943, Swedish intelligence broke a German code and discovered his name mentioned in telegrams to Berlin as a source of information. Swedish authorities thereupon tapped Wennerström's telephone, but apparently nothing of a more incriminating character was found. Wennerström's main contacts were now with the Americans and the Russians. He often served as escort officer and interpreter when Soviet officers visited Swedish air-force installations.

First Sale. Wennerström's first job for Soviet espionage occurred late in 1948. Having become aware that Col. Ivan Petrovich Rybachenko, the Soviet air attaché in Stockholm, was interested in a new Swedish airfield, Wennerström remarked to him, "If this airfield is so important, I could tell you what I know about it for 5000 crowns [about $1000]." Rybachenko, visibly startled, said he would inquire into the matter. Several weeks later, at a diplomatic cocktail party, Rybachenko murmured, "It's a deal." The next time they met at a social affair, the Russian drove Wennerström home. As they parted he handed over a parcel containing the money. Subsequently he received a map showing the location of the airfield.

Wennerström says that his motive in this transaction was to penetrate the Soviet espionage apparatus—in behalf of the United States! He maintains that in 1946 a U.S. intelligence agent surprised him by revealing that his name had been found in the records of a German wartime-espionage organization. The agent

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suggested that, since Wennerström had worked against the Germans, he might be willing to be similarly helpful to the Americans. Wennerström agreed. He had been invited to attend a military aviation show in Moscow. The job suggested, he says, was modest: simply to mail a parcel (which he thought contained radio tubes) as he passed through Leningrad on his way to Moscow.

According to Wennerström, two years passed before he had another contact with U.S. intelligence. This time an American agent engaged him in a lengthy conversation about espionage operations and especially about the technique of the "double agent"—a spy who infiltrates an enemy intelligence organization with a view to betraying its secrets. Wennerström says he found the subject so fascinating that he decided to become a double agent himself. As a start, he made his proposal to Colonel Rybachenko.

Passed Over. U.S. authorities have emphatically denied that Wennerström ever worked for U.S. intelligence. His account is also inherently improbable. It seems unlikely that he was approached in 1946 for such a minor chore as mailing a parcel in Leningrad, especially since he says he received no further overtures from the Americans for two years. And that he would undertake to become a double agent, without prompting, strains credulity even more.

A more plausible explanation for the sale of the map is that he was attracted by the opportunity to make a fast 5000 crowns—throughout his espionage career he was never indifferent to financial rewards. There may have been another motive as well. In 1948, Wennerström, then a lieutenant colonel, was informed that he was being passed over for appointment as a wing commander. Not making it meant that he would never rise above the rank of colonel. Wennerström was bitterly disappointed; he might well have enjoyed a measure of revenge in selling a Swedish military secret.

In any event, when he handed over the map Wennerström agreed to continue contact with Soviet intelligence. Soon after, he was assigned once again as Swedish air attaché to Moscow. He took up his post there on January 27, 1949, and remained for three years.

A Moscow Eagle. In handling Wennerström, the Russians showed superb psychological skill. They exploited his sense of professional frustration, played to his vanity, bolstered his ego at every turn. Before long, they made him a "top agent," allowing him to draw unlimited funds. He was given the rank of major general—higher than he could ever aspire to in the service of Sweden—and the distinctive code name "Eagle."

In Moscow, Wennerström was assigned, for liaison, to a general whom he knew as Pyotr Pavlovich Lemenov. He was greatly impressed with Lemenov, whom he describes as a man with an "almost hypnotic ability" to arouse enthusiasm in his co-workers. Lemenov took special pains with Wennerström, and was his headquarters contact to the end.

After Wennerström left the Soviet Union in 1952, the two men kept in touch by letter. Wennerström's correspondence may have been unique in the annals of espionage, for he wrote Lemenov about family matters, his social rounds, and indeed whatever troubled him. Lemenov was the one man in whom he could confide, "the best friend I ever had."

During his tour of duty in Moscow, Wennerström picked up what data he could on Britain's air-defense system. Through his connections in the U.S. embassy, he says, he was able to provide a certain amount of information about the bomb targets in the Soviet Union being compiled by the Americans.

In his final months in Moscow Wennerström learned that his next post would be Washington, where he would not only serve as air attaché but also help procure U.S. military equipment for the Swedish air force. General Lemenov was delighted. He had a number of specific tasks for Wennerström in the United States, the most important being to obtain technical data on the development of U.S. aircraft, missiles, bomb sights, radio and radar systems, and electronic miniaturization.

Data From D.C. Wennerström arrived in Washington on April 8, 1952. In August, Maj. Gen. Viktor Kuvinov, the Soviet air attaché, called on him at the Swedish embassy. Kuvinov gave the password—"Nikolai Vasilyevich wants to be remembered"—and handed Wennerström a slip of paper indicating where their next meeting would take place.

This general and the other Soviet contact men who succeeded him often arranged seemingly casual meetings in parks and downtown Washington streets. Whenever Wennerström and his contact met, the two men would express surprise at the encounter, shake hands and walk together a bit. Wennerström, who had microfilmed whatever documents were to be passed, would transfer the film roll to Kuvinov while shaking hands. The Soviet embassy, during large diplomatic receptions, was another frequent setting for transfers: Wennerström would leave the films in his topcoat in the cloakroom, and at his leisure Kuvinov would empty the pocket.

Wennerström received $5000 as "starting capital." Thereafter, he says, he averaged $750 a month from his Soviet employers during his five years in Washington. It was regarded as imprudent to throw money around; instead, he accumulated additional funds in his name in Moscow, to be withdrawn upon his retirement. He has never specified the extent of these savings.

What did Soviet intelligence get in return? After Wennerström's arrest, U.S. intelligence agencies sought to retrace his steps. Secretary of Defense Robert S. McNamara has stated that no "current weapons system" was compromised by Wennerström, but conceded that "it is possible that he received certain information regarding design of U.S. weapons." Indeed, this is highly likely, inasmuch as Sweden was buying equipment under the U.S. Military Assistance Program, and the Pentagon traditionally treats Swedish military attachés as good security risks.

Flood of Documents. The years 1957-63 represent the apex of Wennerström's espionage career. Back in Stockholm, he was named to head the air-force section in the Defense Command Office. Across his desk passed, routinely, all sorts of secret documents—operational plans, data on installations, new weaponry, air-defense mechanisms. He had an additional assignment to brief the defense minister on guided missiles, which probably gave him even more access to classified material from the United States than he had had in Washington.

Despite security censorship, it is possible from the record and from informed sources in Stockholm to get a notion of the range of military secrets that Wennerström handed to the Russians during this period. He completely compro-

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mined Sweden's air-defense system—a semi-automatic amalgam of radar and computers which records the path and speed of attacking aircraft. He gave away information on the Draken J-35, the all-weather fighter-interceptor manufactured in Sweden; he provided technical details of the new Viggen, a faster supersonic craft, which can serve as a fighter, bomber or reconnaissance plane, and which ultimately was intended to be the mainstay of Sweden's air fleet.

In 1959 Sweden began to acquire U.S. missiles: the Sidewinder, a supersonic air-to-air missile, which serves as armament for the Draken; the Falcon, a larger air-to-air missile; and the Hawk, a surface-to-air missile designed for defense against low-flying intruders. The Swedes also bought the British Bloodhound, a high-altitude ground-to-air missile. Wennerström sent Moscow classified data on all these weapons. And he provided information on NATO operations—such as U.S. reinforcements in the Mediterranean during the 1956 Suez crisis, and contingency plans to meet the Soviet threat to West Berlin.

Suspicion. In the latter part of 1959, reports reached the Swedish security police that Wennerström had aroused suspicion among a few colleagues because of his persistent curiosity about classified documents which did not seem relevant to his work. Security Superintendent Otto Danielsson obtained court permission to tap Wennerström's telephone. He also put the colonel under intermittent surveillance.

Wennerström, however, was much too cautious to have any incriminating conversation over the phone, and he seemed to have a sixth sense about the presence of the police. Danielsson once drove by Wennerström's home. Wennerström, who was sitting in his own car on the quiet suburban street, made a U-turn and followed the policeman's car; he had obviously spotted it as unfamiliar in the neighborhood.

Evidence about Wennerström's economic circumstances was also inconclusive. He had overspent his income by about $3400 in 1960 and $1200 in 1961. However, his wealthy in-laws could have been helping the family financially.

Though there was no charge that could be brought against him, the police were sufficiently concerned to prevent Wennerström from ob- taining another post with possibilities for espionage. He was due for retirement in June 1961; in Sweden a retired officer frequently takes a desk job in a military establishment to supplement his pension. Wennerström applied for appointment as a duty officer on the air-force staff. The security police prevailed upon the minister of defense to deny Wennerström the post.

Instead, Wennerström was ultimately employed by the Foreign Office as a disarmament consultant, to help in the preparatory work for the Geneva disarmament conference. Here, it was thought, he would be less of a security risk.

Snafu. This decision was the first of a series of blatant official blunders. Foreign Minister Osten Undén was informed of the doubts about Wennerström, but the police, fearing a leak, did not want anyone else in the Foreign Office to be told. The result was that it was impossible to keep Wennerström under observation on the job.

Once installed in his new post, Wennerström made a practice of visiting former colleagues in the defense establishment and asking for secret military information. He explained that he needed it as orientation for his disarmament work. He often got what he wanted. In July 1962 it was ordered that all such requests be channeled through the office of the intelligence chief, Col. Bo Westin. But again there was a snafu. Nobody sent the order to the Defense books-and-forms warehouse, where Wennerström freely repaired to pick up classified data.

Still there was no hard evidence against him. The police learned that Wennerström had a short-wave radio set; over the phone Wennerström's younger daughter once told a friend that her father had "the world's strangest radio," which could pick up only Russia. The police investigated to find out if Wennerström was doing any transmitting, could discover nothing.

Spy Gear. A court order to search Wennerström's home could have been obtained, but the police feared that if they found no evidence they might destroy the case. Finally, in May 1963, Danielsson and his colleagues enlisted Mrs. Carin Rosén, Wennerström's part-time domestic, as an undercover agent. Had she been recruited earlier, the case might have been broken more than a year before.

Mrs. Rosén, a quiet woman in her mid-50's, had long been suspicious of Wennerström, for he owned an odd assortment of equipment: a large stand with over-arching electric lights and a camera suspended above, which she correctly surmised was used for photographing documents; a safe hidden behind a curtain in a storeroom; a radio, of a sort she had never seen, built into a bookcase. The colonel, she said, spent hours at his photography behind the locked door of his storeroom.

One morning, about a month after Mrs. Rosén had been recruited, she phoned the police to say she had found two odd packages under some sawdust in the attic. Film rolls were discovered inside the packages. The police at last had evidence. The next day Wennerström was arrested.

End of the Trail. It was just in time, for he was planning to flee the country. At a British embassy reception, he had been cold-shouldered by Gen. Torsten Rapp, commander-in-chief of the Swedish armed forces. Wennerström suddenly feared that the general suspected him. He was correct.

Once in custody, the colonel said at first that he had been a member of an undercover Soviet opposition group, working against the present regime. Then he stated that he had spied only against the United States, not against Sweden. When that story did not stand up, he said he would tell all.

He maintained a dignified bearing through four months of questioning. The façade finally cracked in October, when Wennerström tried to kill himself with an overdose of sleeping pills. After several weeks of psychotherapy he recovered his equanimity, and the marathon police interrogation was resumed. Much of it consisted of showing Wennerström

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secret documents and asking whether he had transmitted them to the Soviet Union.

In court Wennerström made no plea for mercy. "My activity has been a part of the international big-power espionage which is a factor in the cold war," he said, not without a trace of pride. Then he clicked his heels and announced, "I am prepared to stand for the juridical consequences."

In some other countries the consequences would have been worse. In humane Sweden, Wennerström's life term means that he can be released for good behavior after 10 or 12 years. Meanwhile, General Rapp has estimated that the damage to the country's defenses will cost 57 million dollars to repair.

In Stockholm the impact of the Wennerström case is still keenly felt in government circles. The most telling charge against the government had been its assignment of Wennerström to the Foreign Office, after the persistent suspicions he had aroused at the Defense Ministry. The probable explanation is that very few officials were able to credit the suspicions, or bring themselves to believe that an eminent lifelong soldier could betray his country. A briefing on the case for Prime Minister Erlander had been scheduled as early as April 1962 but did not take place. Erlander stated, after the colonel's arrest, "Regrettably, on no occasion did I receive the impression that the issue concerned a very important question."

In matters of espionage, every nation apparently needs one major shock to lose its innocence. In the postwar period, the only other spies caught in Sweden were small-time operatives, with limited sources of information. The Wennerström case has had the same educational effect in Sweden as the Hiss case did in the United States.